

HB 517

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT ACT

Critical Incidents are powerful traumatic events that initiate the crisis response. These events are usually outside of the usual range of normal human experiences of the job or in one's personal life. Examples are line of duty deaths or serious injury to first responders. Child deaths, multiple casualty events and severe threats to emergency personnel are also classified as "critical incidents." If not managed and resolved appropriately, crisis response may lead to several psychological disorders including Acute Stress Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Panic Attacks, Depression, Abuse of Alcohol and Other Drugs, etc. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is a comprehensive, systematic and integrated multi-tactic crisis intervention approach to manage critical incident stress after traumatic events. CISM teams consist of mental health providers, firefighters, emergency medical or search and rescue personnel, police officers, physicians, nurses, soldiers, clergy, hospital workers, communications personnel and community members.

Importantly, CISM debriefings do not implicate Montana's open meeting laws or the Montana Constitution's Right to Know provision as they are strictly a mental health exercise or gathering. The only discussion during a CISM debriefing is the *emotional reactions and responses* regarding the critical incident. The only goal of a CISM debriefing is to mitigate the *emotional* impact of the critical incident; or to facilitate normal recovery processes, in normal people, who are having normal reactions to abnormal events.

- \* **No official action regarding the critical incident is taken.**
- \* **Management or administration is not included unless they are trained team members or were a part of the critical incident.**
- \* **CISM DEBRIEFINGS DO NOT ANALYZE, DISCUSS, OR MAKE DETERMINATIONS REGARDING THE APPROPRIATENESS OR LEGALITY OF ANY ACTION, ACTIONS, OR INACTION ON THE PART OF ANY INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP.**

**WHAT THIS BILL DOES:**

This bill is a model piece of legislation developed by a coalition of mental health providers and first responder associations and organizations. Importantly, CISM is not new to Montana or anywhere else. These debriefings have been occurring for decades. What is new is attempts to invade these mental health sessions for litigation purposes.

- Recognizes the importance of CISM and protects the integrity of the process.
- Provides definitions so that the very specific and limited nature of what is covered under this legislation is clear.
- Ensures that CISM debriefings are private and confidential.
- Provides immunity to team members. As mentioned above, team members are volunteers from all different parts of a community: firefighters, EMTs, clergy, mental health providers, etc. As some of the team members may be state or local government employees, a 2/3 vote is required.

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February 17, 2009

House Judiciary Committee  
2009 Montana Legislature

Re: Support HB 517

Dear Members of the Committee:

I am writing to support HB 517. As a trainer for the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, I have trained over 600 Montana Law Enforcement, Fire and other EMS professionals in the processes of Critical Incident Stress Management. As a member of the Gallatin County CISM team, I have provided hundreds of interventions, including a number of them for New York City police officers after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

CISM interventions work. They only work though, if the confidentiality aspect is maintained. The opportunity to confidentially deal with the thoughts and reactions of a critical incident (with others who were involved in that incident) can start personnel on the road to healing and possibly prevent Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from developing.

If personnel cannot count on confidentiality being maintained, they will be less likely to attend debriefings and more likely to experience the build-up of cumulative and post-traumatic stress. When these types of stress are not dealt with in a structured, timely manner, the officer is more likely to leave the profession prematurely, and at a much higher risk for alcoholism, divorce, and suicide.

Giving personnel the assurance of confidentiality in CISM interventions will ensure more officers will attend debriefings, and be less likely to succumb to the negative effects of extreme stress. Over time, I believe, that will save departments and counties money, increase morale, and increase resiliency among officers.

Thank you for supporting this very important bill. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at 585-3743 or at [carant@montana.net](mailto:carant@montana.net).

Sincerely,



Carol Staben-Burroughs, MS, LCPC  
Gallatin County CISM Team  
Trainer, International Critical Incident Stress Foundation